

City of Words:
Worcester Area Writer's Project
Forming a Profile for Jack O'Connell

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IQP Project

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A Profile for Jack

Authors are just as diverse as the pieces they write. Just as their works are the combinations of unique specialties and skills, the authors themselves have unique qualities that define the literature they produce. Unfortunately, many of the greatest writers are deceased. But there are troves of hidden authors that continue to grace their audiences with some of the richest and most descriptive works imaginable. The goal of the Worcester Writers' Project is to communicate with some of these authors that reside in and around the city of Worcester, and present their information to the general public in the form of an interactive database. There are many different means by which this information can be conveyed, but the primary vehicles of information for the Writers' Project are interactive media such as photographs and interviews. The project is not one to be taken lightly as it takes a large amount of effort and coordination to carry out.

Working directly with Jack O'Connell has been one of the most rewarding experiences I have ever had the good fortune to enjoy. His works are gems that highlight the darker, yet fascinating parts of the "rust-belt" city of Worcester. The undertaking of this project began with the review and analyzing of Jack's works. Jack is the author of five novels, one of which is a New York Times bestseller. While this was one of my favorite parts of the project, it was also one of the most difficult. I resolved myself to reading each of his novels so that when the time came, I would be able to provide the Worcester Writers' Project with a detailed look at Jack's work. While this tactic worked impeccably, it was extremely time consuming. The project was progressing with each turn of the page, but I felt didn't have much to show for it.

If I had to recommend an alternate way to examine an author's work, I would be hard pressed for suggestions. However, I would recommend that you keep concise notes of each book. I took notes in the margins of my books, but found that they were much more difficult to reference than if I had them in one centralized location. A good memory can be very helpful, but after three or four books, it is very easy for things to run together.

Once I examined Jack's work, I contacted him for some information. One of the things Jack is known for is his use of real locations in Worcester as fragmented settings for his work. The very first thing I contacted Jack about was setting up a date for an interview, as well as a list of places that I could photograph. While this interaction clearly won't be the same for every case, it is important to develop a good contact between you and the author. They are the expert on their work, but at the same time, you may find something that they didn't think of when they were writing.

When the time comes to set up an interview, it's very important to sit down and think of all the things that go into an interview (i.e. camera-person, camera, tripod, microphone, setting). Luckily I was able to find a day, within a week's notice, that worked for both Jack and me. I would recommend that once contact is established with an author, an interview is scheduled way off in advance. Some authors travel extensively, so the best way to approach it is to lock in a date. A location also needs to be chosen. The best place to interview an author is in their element, meaning that their own personal office or study should be the prime location. However, if there isn't a way to get such a space in time, any comfortable and close setting will work. I would suggest staying away from large rooms, because if the room is too large, the video recording of the interview will require extensive editing.

In terms of equipment for the interview, it would help to have the following: video camera, camera, tripod, and microphones. Any video camera that has a fire-wire or USB connection will serve extremely well for this kind of project. The tripod is for stabilizing the video camera. No matter how still your camera man/woman thinks they are, your footage will be shaky if you don't use a tripod.

If I could change one thing about the interview I conducted with Jack, it would be my use of microphones. While the microphone on the camera is enough to capture the conversation, it also captures a lot of ambient noise, and even the mechanical sounds of the camera itself. I had to compensate for the geometrics of the room, the noise of the camera, and white noise, once the video was captured into the video editing software.

Once I had collected the entire interview, I compiled the raw video in chronological order. At this point I only edited to make the video flow. When all was said and done, the video was approximately an hour long. The average student doing a report on an author doesn't have the time to sift through an hour long video that covers multiple topics, so I developed three sub-videos in order to make the content more accessible to users in the future. The questions that I had prepared for Jack covered a wide spectrum of information regarding his work. Fortunately for me, I was able to organize my questions into the categories of book content, career advice, and location based writing. Rather than sorting your questions into categories after you've already asked them, I would suggest writing your questions based on categories you will develop later on. In other words, plan your questions around your categories, not the other way around.

Using the right software to edit the video is just as important as the recording process. I had access to Adobe Premier Elements 4.0. Premier is a fantastic program for video editing, but I wouldn't recommend it for anyone who has little to no experience with video editing software. The advantage to using Premier is that the program allows you several intricate options for altering audio as well as video. Premier also has a vast series of transitions for moving from scene to scene, and pre-made credit templates for giving credit to the makers of the video. For those who have never edited video, I would suggest Windows Movie Maker. Windows Movie Maker is very basic video editing software that allows the user to cut their video into fragments, and move it around.

The typical WPI student has an extremely full schedule. When planning editing time, interview time, meeting times, and photography times, it is almost guaranteed that you won't be able to work on the project every day. You need to be able to leave time for unexpected events and software problems.

When dealing with any kind of software, you need to plan extra time for setbacks. When I first started editing the video, I really wanted to incorporate still shots into the clips. This is done by overlaying the still shots on top of the video track. But when I first pulled the still shots into the video, the computer did not recognize that I had done so. Sometimes these fixes are temporary, but other times they take more time to figure out than you can afford.

When constructing the actual website, you will most likely use Adobe Dreamweaver. One thing I would recommend is to coordinate with Professor Dempsey and the Humanities department to try and get a license of Dreamweaver. This will allow full accessibility to the program on both school and private computers, meaning that you don't have to be in the

library media labs to work on the site. Dreamweaver isn't too complicated, but it can be challenging to pick up. While there is some coding involved, there is a graphic interface with which the user can monitor how the code reacts to their changes. Sometimes the graphic interface won't want to work, but the ATC (Academic Technology Center) can certainly help you out with that. In terms of getting the website up and running the best bet is to coordinate with Jim Monaco. Jim is the local expert when it comes to YouTube and creating websites. He can help you create the website, map the correct drive, and put the website out there for people to access.

YouTube is an excellent medium for both posting/viewing videos. WPI actually has its own site based off of the YouTube network, where you can post your videos. The only thing required to get your videos on YouTube is a title, description, and search tags. The search tags are what enable users to find your videos using YouTube's search box, therefore it is extremely important that you be as specific as possible when listing these. Once you have this info, you need to ensure that your videos are formatted properly, as YouTube only supports certain kinds of video files. My edited videos were .avi files. These files are extremely large and cumbersome. Just four videos amassed approximately 28GB of memory. There is a program called the Adobe Media Encoder that allows you to drag and drop your videos into it. This is essentially a converter that allows you to input one file and get another file-type as the end result. Once you have selected the file you want to convert, you set the file conversion and wait. In approximately one hour all of my files were converted to H.264 files, which will transfer to YouTube in minutes rather than hours. Jim will post your videos once you turn in both the files, and their written information. When making your website, YouTube makes it extremely easy to

input videos right into your site. All you need to do is locate the embedded code, and copy and paste it into the code for Dreamweaver. The nice thing about that is the player control bar that gets imported with your video. When the user clicks on the video, a timeline marker, play/pause button, and volume control will all be displayed. This eliminates the need to visit YouTube's actual site, and lets the user interact with the media without leaving the page.

The next step for the website is to get it out of personal myWPI space, and into/onto a hosted server. Professor Dempsey can request for a group space to be set up where the website can be hosted from. Due to time limitations, the website is currently hosted via my personal myWPI account. The data and essentially the entire website can easily be transferred to this group space very easily. The transfer just requires that the user highlight all of the files related to the website, and drag them over into the group space. From there, the entire World Wide Web can view the site, its contents, and contact information. Once the site is up and operational, you should be good to go.

In summary, this project is going to appear very simple and straightforward. Unfortunately though, there are very few things in life that are so. When executing this project, you need to be extremely attentive to the smallest detail, because it is very easy to fall into a time-crunch or pitfall. Something as simple formatting the videos incorrectly could wind up costing you hours of precious time. Anytime that rendering is needed, plan on a long wait before being able to move on to the next step. There are ample opportunities for help and guidance, but because everyone at WPI is constantly running on a full schedule, but in order to take advantage of such help, you need to plan ahead and move at a constant speed.

Listed URL's

Home Page: <http://users.wpi.edu/~sconlin/COW/Main%20Page.html>

Contact Information Page: <http://users.wpi.edu/~sconlin/COW/Dempsey%20Contact.html>

Jack O'Connell Profile Page: <http://users.wpi.edu/~sconlin/COW/Jack%20OC.html>